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ABSTRACT

A study examined two questions: Do students include more information or present it more concisely and explicitly when speaking or writing? and, Does language show different thematic relationships (through syntax or diction) depending upon the mode? Twenty-four community college students viewed one of two brief films and responded orally or in writing. Responses were analyzed to determine the amount of narrative and descriptive information. Results showed that (1) students conveyed similar amounts of information in each mode, (2) students who conveyed less information in writing also conveyed less information in speaking, (3) students were more explicit and more concise in writing, and (4) better writers had more variety in syntax and diction. In general, all writers adjusted their initial elements and information structure based on mode. (EL)

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EATURES OF THEMATIC AND INFORMATION STRUCTURE IN ORAL AND WRITTEN NARRATIVES OF GOOD AND POOR WRITERS

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Instructors of composition who teach adolescents and young adults are finding writing problems which are not amenable to traditional instructional techniques. Students who have read and written little, who are not familiar with traditional terminology of instruction in composition, and who in earlier years probably would not have continued their education through high school are waiting to be taught. Teachers need to be able to identify the kinds of problems their students encounter, to explain why linguistic choices students make are ineffective, and to offer guidance in helping students to improve.

A study of the speech as well as the writing of students, as suggested by Shaughnessy (1977), can provide direct evidence of whether problems are the result of unfamiliarity with the medium of writing or of differences between the media, evidence which, at best, can only be inferred in a study limited to pieces of writing.

This study examined spoken and written presentations about the same topic in situations which were rhetorically comparable. The study addressed the following questions:

1. Do students include more information in one mode or the other? Do they present information more concisely and more explicitly in one mode?

2. Does language show different thematic relations depending upon the mode? Are these realized through differences in syntax? differences in diction?

Studies of the syntax of student writers demonstrate clearly that the state of analysis (and consequent instruction) is limited compared to the complexity of the writing of even quite

inexperienced, unskilled writers. The linguistic model for many studies is transformational-generative grammar, a sentence-based, competence (as opposed to performance) model which provides a poor fit for analyzing actual discourse. That model is a sophisticated one, but its application to studies of student writing has been limited primarily to the length of T-units used by students of various ages and with or without instruction (Mellon, 1969; O'Hare, 1971). The resulting measure is called syntactic maturity, although it does not take into account transformations which shorten clause length. The maturity, so called, is based on counting, not on reader perception of effective communication, so Loban's (1976) term "communication unit" for what is usually called a T-unit is ironic.

An alternative linguistic approach, Functional Sentence Perspective (Daneš, 1974; Firbas, 1974), considers communicative measures: Thematic structure (what the producer wants to say) and Information structure (what the audience needs to know). These categories have theoretical appeal; this study investigated whether they can be applied for pedagogical purposes to pieces of written discourse.

The study used filmed narratives to structure a speaking situation and writing situation which would focus on limited content and would be as similar as possible to one another except for the mode of presentation. Since writing does not provide feedback, a speaking situation in which one person was clearly the speaker and the other clearly the listener was established. Reporting on a film parallels writing more than does the give and

take of conversation.

Films as the stimulus for talking and writing produced discourses which were on the same topic and primarily narrative by giving the students a common stimulus and a chronological organizing principle. An individual student might notice, understand, or remember more about the film than others, but no one needed to draw upon specialized previous knowledge. Since the stimulus was shared and preserved, the researcher could compare one presentation with another and review a film to determine the accuracy of an assertion.

Procedures

The participants were community college students who ranged in age from nineteen to forty-five, with an average age of twenty-seven. Twelve were male and twelve female. Each student viewed one of two brief films. The students were allowed to view their film more than once, if they wished, before they spoke and wrote.

Half the students spoke before they wrote and half wrote before they spoke. The order of speaking was counterbalanced to reduce the possible influence of rehearsal or fatigue.

Most students who agreed to take part in the study gave evidence of taking the task seriously. Two viewed their film more than once. Only one said anything to indicate that she was not bothering to tell all she was capable of. She said, "Oh, I skipped a lot. Oh, well." (Subject #16, oral)

In most oral sessions, the listeners were silent or confined themselves to brief comments.

Results

The students who spoke first both spoke and wrote slightly less than those who wrote first.

	Talk-Write	Write-Talk
Mean length of speaking	605.7 words	691.3 words
Mean length of writing	344.4 words	383.3 words

The writings ranged in length from 178 words to 749 words and from 12 to 68 T-units. The mean length was 364 words and 26 T-units. The oral narratives ranged from 199 to 2311 words (196 to 2150 when phatic expressions and time fillers like right and you know were eliminated) and from 11 to 244 T-units. The mean length was 649 words and 62 T-units.

Experienced English teachers at a community college, using holistic scoring procedures, rated the written discourses for information and for writing quality.

Fairly strong positive correlations existed between the raters on both criteria.

Correlations of ratings	Film #1: #00173	Film #2: Blaze Glory
Information	.706	.755
Writing Quality	.832	.511

Papers were divided into high, middle, and low groupings. No student who rated high on one criterion rated low on the other. Papers with high ratings on each criterion were longer than those with low ratings. For the total group, the relationship between ratings and average T-unit length was not clear, but students with low ratings on writing quality had shorter T-units on the average.

Narrative and Descriptive Information

For each film, the oral and written responses were analyzed to determine the narrative and descriptive information which was most frequently included. Completely different wordings to describe the "same" action or transaction were treated as the same information even if the focus differed in the two wordings.

In their oral presentations, all twenty-four of the students gave narratives about the film they had seen with some supportive description. In writing, one student gave a critical analysis of the kind which is commonly expected in academic settings but which presupposes reader familiarity with literature, if not explicitly with the work being considered. Other students supplemented their narratives with brief or extended interpretations.

The participants tended to present slightly more in their second presentation than in their first, no matter what the order of presentation. Of those who talked first, seven gave more information in writing, four gave less, and one gave the same amount. Forty facts were lost and fifty-five gained. Of those who wrote before they spoke, eight gave more information in speaking, three gave less and one the same amount. Again the net gain was fifteen; thirty-seven facts were lost and fifty-two gained.

With the exception of the written presentation of #15 whose critical analysis has been mentioned, all the students rated high on information had more pieces of information in speaking and writing than any of the students rated low (Table 1).

For this small sample, the students who were rated low on

information in their written presentations seem not to have been thwarted exclusively by their unfamiliarity or difficulty with the written form since they presented less information than students rated high in each medium, but they presented slightly more information in writing than they did in speaking.

Table 1. Amount of Information Presented in Speaking and Writing by Students Rated High or Low on the Amount of Information in Writing

Information	Writing	Speaking
High, total	211	224
High, mean	35.2	37.3
Low, total	98	94
Low, mean	16.3	15.7

Some students commented on the significance of the film while others did not. Four of the six writers who were rated high on information included a general statement or criticism. Four of six writers rated low on information did not. Similarly, five of six rated highest on writing quality included such statements while five of seven rated low did not.

Syntax

The basic category for the analysis of syntax was the T-unit, a main clause and its subordinate clauses. The participants produced 1493 oral and 637 written T-units. The few partial clauses were treated as T-units when they advanced the discourse. When the listener supplied a word the speaker accepted to complete a thought, the T-unit was counted as if the listener had not interrupted.

The syntactic patterns of speech and writing were cate-

gorized. Syntax varied not only between speaking and writing but also between the writing of the good writers and that of the poor writers. Orally, 67.4% of the T-units had no co-ordination or subordination. Such sentences were used 46.4% of the time by poor writers and 37.4% by good writers. Co-ordinated verbs, relatives, appositives and other reduced clauses, and other subordination all appeared more in writing than speaking. The patterns which showed the largest differences between good and poor writers were appositives/reduced clauses (good writers 18.4%; poor writers 11.6%) and other subordination (good writers 18.9%); poor writers 11.6%).

The better writers were able to achieve their results with only slightly longer T-units, on the average, than the poorer writers because of a combination of conceptual, lexical, and syntactic choices. One syntactic consideration is that they used constructions like appositives and participial phrases which were economical in words used. They were able to support the complexity of their understanding about relationships between events with appropriate syntax.

The relatively low percentage of simple sentences in writing suggests a reason for difficulty in analyzing the thematic and information structures of the written presentations. The good writers, in particular, had "sub-themes" in subordinate clauses. The relationship between old and new information was similarly complicated.

Table 2. Percentage of Total T-units in Oral and Written Discourse Which Were Characterized by or Included Specified Syntactic Categories.

	Written	Oral
No coordination or subordination	41.6%	67.4%
Coordination	22.2%	8%
Complement	7.1%	8.7%
Relative	13.5%	7.2%
Other subordination	19.1%	11.1%
Appositive/Reduced	12.1%	3.8%

Table 3. Percentage of Total T-units in Oral Discourse of Good and Poor Writers Which Were Characterized by or Included Specified Syntactic Categories.

	Good	Poor
No coordination, subordination	66.3%	68.3%
Coordination	7.7%	8.6%
Complement	7.8%	4.8%
Relative	6.1%	5.9%
Other subordination	11.5%	11.4%
Appositive/Reduced	5.8%	3.1%

Table 4. Percentage of Total T-units in Written Discourse of Good and Poor Writers Which Were Characterized by or Included Specified Syntactic Categories.

	Good	Poor
No coordination or subordination	37.4%	46.4%
Coordination	22.3%	23.9%
Complement	6.3%	4.5%
Relative	14%	12%
Other subordination	18.9%	11%
Appositive/Reduced	18.4%	11.6%

Diction

Oral narratives can be distinguished from written narratives on the basis of differences in syntax and sometimes because of differences in wording. The many simple sentences in oral narratives contained an abundance of pronouns as subjects. Some words and phrases were characteristically oral. One oral pattern was the conclusion of a phrase with a vague and everything or and stuff, what Chafe (1982) called "fuzziness". Some students had characteristic expressions which were repeated: more or less, type (as in machine-type thing) as well as the expected you know.

Some participants also used colloquial expressions like guy and dude in speaking and man in writing. In speaking, #8 used dude to refer to three characters: Blaze Glory, the banker, and the villain. Participants used good guy and bad guy in both speech and writing.

In oral presentations, participants used more direct quotations than they did in writing. Four participants used a quotation with no introduction or tag, relying on vocal qualities or context to indicate a quotation. Two used the present of go rather than a form of say as a tag in oral direct quotations.

The expression which was most clearly a story telling formula was "he saves the day," used by four participants orally and one in writing.

In writing, several participants (rated middle or low on writing quality) used stilted verbal clusters like commences to pierce, proceeded to capture, proceeded to move.

Other than the sentences with the words which were exclusively oral, word choice was a less reliable indicator of mode than

syntax. Differences in wording between good and poor writers, even if they could be quantified, might be more useful as indicators of differences in conceptualization than as measures of writing quality.

Thematic Structure

The initial difficulty in the application of thematic categories to actual discourse is the selection of definitions which are reliable. If the Theme is "what the sentence is about," how is it distinguished from the grammatical subject? If the Theme is "what comes first," where does that element end?

Even in oral narratives what comes first and grammatical subject are not always identical. Five of twelve students, introducing the butterfly in the film #00173, placed the butterfly, the subject, after the verb. For example:

> Out of this machine-type thing comes a butterfly (#15, oral)

The Initial Element is an alternative way to consider discourse relations. In many cases, particularly in speaking, the Theme was the grammatical subject and the initial sentence element. In some cases, the Initial Element was an empty word such as there or an expression that provides context. Such an Initial Element, when it is Given, offers a way in which a speaker (or, more likely, a writer) can have a subject/ Theme that is New without necessarily disrupting the flow of the discourse. On the contrary, sentences with complex perspective can increase the smoothness of thematic progression as elements are properly placed in dominant or subsidiary positions.

For this analysis, the strongest possible distinction between Initial Element and Theme as "what the sentence is about" was made by selecting the grammatical subject as, or as part of, the usual theme and identifying Initial Elements and Themes separately. The grammatical subjects were limited to content subjects, not existential *there* or preposed *it*.

In this study, many sentences reported actions of the characters in the films. The participants generally produced sentences with the grammatical subject, an agent, in the initial position. The range of grammatical subjects and variations in syntax probably were not as great as they would have been if the students had written expository essays about abstractions, with no more built-in structure than the assignment of a topic. In sentences of interpretation or analysis the themes were more varied.

When participants went beyond reporting events, the perspective of the speaker/writer as well as the perspective of characters was included: *It seemed*, *I guess*. In addition, participants might include anything in the world they felt helped their audience to share the experience of the film. The experiences they drew upon varied in sophistication.

Within the framework of narration about the film, participants generally followed the actions of the most salient character but moved freely to tell about actions of other characters within scenes they had established, returned to the next action of the main character and then on to the reaction of another or others to that action. Narratives did not have smooth Thematic Progression if participants "saw" the total scene from the movie

as they made their presentation but did not tell the audience about some part of the scene before saying something which presupposed that knowledge. This kind of gap, represented by, for example, pronouns without antecedents, is not a surprise to teachers of writing.

The analysis of subjects had several aspects. First, it considered how many different subjects a student included. Second, it considered the cohesive ties between subjects and what preceded them in the discourse.

As Table 5 demonstrates, participants who were rated high on writing quality had, on the average, more different subjects and more total subjects in both speaking and writing. In each mode, the participants who were rated high had a somewhat lower percentage of their total subjects as different subjects. Another way to express this fact is that for the writers rated high on quality, a higher percentage of subjects were presented more than once; these students said more sentences about their subjects.

Table 5. Number and Percentage of Themes which Were Different Themes, a Comparison of Students Rated High and Low on Writing Quality.

Writing	Good Writers	Poor Writers
Total number of themes	204	147
Number of different themes	76	66
Percentage of different themes	37%	44%

Speaking	Good Writers	Poor Writers
Total number of themes	615	276
Number of different themes	142	84
Percentage of different themes	23%	30%

The more frequent repetition of subjects by good writers in both writing and speaking may be compared with the larger amount of information by students rated high on information in both their written and spoken communication. Both results suggest that some students notice and communicate more, that a difference in perception or invention exists.

Information may be introduced as theme or rheme. After an initial mention, a subsequent reference may be considered old information, even if it is the first appearance as a theme. Since a coherent narrative has many multiple references to topics, the categorization of these previously mentioned themes will indicate frequently used or preferred ways of expressing old information. Table 6 shows the preponderance of pronouns to express repeated themes in the oral presentation of participants whether they were rated high or low in writing quality. In writing, both groups used a higher percentage of exact repetitions or substitute nouns (relative to the number of pronouns) compared to the repetition-pronoun ratio for speaking. In fact, the better writers used more repetitions of nouns than pronouns in writing. Five of the six participants used more specific, nominal references than pronouns, one using more than twice as many repetitions or substitutions and one using four times as many repetitions or substitutions as pronouns. Three of the seven poorer writers also used more nouns than pronouns, but the aggregates indicate more pronouns than repetitions. The medium of writing seems to produce the increased explicitness of more repetitions in old themes.

Table 6. Comparison of the Use of Repetition and Substitution with the Use of Pronominal Themes in the Oral and Written Production of Good and Poor Writers

	Good Writers		Poor Writers	
	Oral	Written	Oral	Written
Repetition and Substitution	104	83	45	39
Pronominal Themes	330	45	153	42

Although the poorer writers had a somewhat higher percentage of pronominal themes in writing than good writers, both groups had a much lower percentage of pronominal themes in writing than in speaking. The mode seems to be decisive in the pattern of pronominal themes.

Starting Points

This analysis categorized the content of non-subject beginnings in two ways: 1) by content, 2) by grammatical form. The categories of content were Empty (most frequently *there*) and Time, Location, and Other. The categories of form were Words (adverbs; nouns with or without modifiers), Prepositional Phrases, and Clauses or word groups including verbal elements. If more than one element preceded the subject (for example, *after a fast chase through the desert*), the first was counted. *All of a sudden* was coded with the prepositional phrases. *Then* and *now* were considered separately.

Words and expressions like *well*, *you know*, and *anyways* were not included in the analysis of Starting Points and Information Structure. They were regarded as ways for speakers to indicate they had more to say while they were in the process of organizing further discourse.

To distinguish between openings which present a genuine alternative perspective to the grammatical subject and those which do not, the analysis excluded from consideration T-units beginning with an Empty and those beginning with then and now.

Table 7. T-units Beginning with Something Other than the Grammatical Subject, Excluding Those Beginning with Empty or then or now

Written	18.6% of total T-units
Oral	8.8% of total T-units

Empty and then/now are primarily oral. Empty expressions opened 1.9% of the written T-units and 3.4% of the oral ones, nearly twice as many. Then/now began 1.7% of the written T-units and 7.2% of the oral ones, four times as many. The good and poor writers had similarly low rates of the use of Empty expressions at the beginning of T-units, 1.4% and 1.3% respectively. The good writers began no T-units with then or now, but the poor writers used them in 3.9% of their T-units. In the oral presentations, the two groups were more similar in their use of then/now than Empty. The good writers began orally with Empty 2% of the time while the poor writers used Empty 3.7%. The groups used then/now 5.1% and 5.8% of their oral openings. The good writers made a greater adjustment to mode in eliminating then/now in writing. Table 8 summarizes the frequency of each content category among the non-subject sentence openings.

Table 8. Frequency of Non-subject Sentence Openings by Content Categories

	Time	Location	Other
Written	12.9%	2.9%	4.5%
Oral	13.0%	1.7%	1.2%

The category of Other included transpositions, some resulting from topicalization; self reference (to me); adverbs like naturally, obviously, actually, basically.

Writers rated good used non-subject beginnings of T-units for cohesion, for example:

> He let go of it and it flew to the panel where the robot tried unsuccessfully once to catch it. The second time it caught the butterfly in its right "hand" and with the needle or small rod in its left hand it pierced the butterfly. (#21, written; emphasis added)
>
> The completely robotic manager is to me a representation of the managerial an[d] executive class of our society. To these people the bottom line is profit. (#23 written; emphasis added)

Writers, whether rated good or poor, were nearly three times as likely to begin their written sentences with non-subject clauses as to begin their oral sentences that way (8.7% to 3.1%). Prepositional phrases were nearly twice as likely in writing as in speaking (7.0% to 3.7%).

Given-New

Each T-unit was analyzed for information structure. The analysis considered T-units in seven categories. Simple T-units were counted separately from complex ones. The categories are described and illustrated below.

1. Initial Old followed by New

The basic narrative pattern, especially for the oral presentations, was a previously introduced, i.e. Old, subject and a

had no subordination but could include modification if any New information was in the predicate. The complex T-units could have subordination, but, if initial, it was in the Old--New order. In the oral presentations, 49.7% were simple Old--New and 20.5% were complex, for a total of 70.2% in this basic order. In writing, the total percentage of T-units in this order was almost as high, 66.6%, but the proportions were different. In writing, 27.5% were simple and 39.1% were complex.

In the basic narrative sentence of oral discourse, the direct object, like the subject, has often been previously introduced. The action is the new element.

2. New occurring initially

The first elements in these T-units were New. They included not only New entities but also words and expressions like all of a sudden and meanwhile. Beginning a T-unit with New information was more common in writing than in speaking; the percentages were 12.2% and 5.9% respectively.

3. Personal references

These T-units began with reference to the presenter or to the audience. The second-person pronouns included statements or questions directed explicitly to the audience and those with a general reference or a disguised self reference.

Interpersonal references were more common in speaking than writing, with 9.% of the oral and 4.8% of the written T-units beginning with first or second person pronouns. Since many of these T-units included a complement after an opening such as I think, more of them are complex than simple in both speaking and writing.

4. Inferrable

These T-units began with reference based upon context, general knowledge, one component of a previous reference, or something the audience might be expected to infer. They included reference to previously unmentioned film makers (they showed) or film processes (and then the camera backs up, #21, oral). Also included were references to a worker's hand or face after the worker had been introduced.

Twenty of the written presentations and twenty-one of the oral ones began with a unit which included a reference to the film as an Inferrable, for example:

> The movie I would say takes place sometimes in the very distant future....(#1, written)

The students' lack of provision of a context, even in writing, may have been a result of the nature of the directions for and the conditions of the presentations. Still, the plunge into the plot of the film suggests the dominance of the conversational mode that assumes shared context if not actual experience.

T-units beginning with an Inferrable were more common in writing than in speaking, 11.7% and 5.1% respectively. As with Old--New T-units, simple sentences are more common in speaking and complex ones in writing.

5. Empty

The Empty T-units are essentially the same as the thematically Empty.

6. Old--Old

In speaking, students sometimes repeated themselves, pro-

ducing T-units with Old--Old information. Only one written T-unit was coded this way; it was complex with some new information in a later portion of the sentence.

7. Other

Two oral and two written T-units (.1% and .3%) did not fit into any of the previous categories and were included here.

Both the writers rated good and those rated poor tended to be similar to the total group in the frequency of the use of the categories of information structure. The poor writers used a somewhat higher percentage of Old--New and Inferrable constructions than the good writers or the total group. The good writers used more, and the poor writers used fewer, initial New than the total group.

Table 9. Use of Information Structure Categories by Good, Poor, and All Writers

	Old--New	Initial New	Inferrable
Total group	66.6%	13.2%	11.7%
Good writers	67.1%	15.9%	11.6%
Poor writers	70.0%	12.0%	14.7%

The study did not analyze the effectiveness of individual T-units within the categories of Functional Sentence Perspective (Theme, Initial Elements, Information Structure). T-units in categories such as Empty or Old--Old are not rich in content but have value in the inter-personal situation. Among the categories that were used more in writing than in speaking, further study would be needed to determine if their use is a product of the

inexperience of even the best of the group, if their use is to be recommended, or if some examples in the category are effective while others are not. If the last is true, the category is too broad to be useful.

An example of a category used more in writing than speaking is initial New. A different kind of study would be required to judge the demands writers made with initial New and the ability and willingness of readers to meet the demands. Examples of sentences reporting the appearance of the butterfly demonstrate writing did not share the avoidance that occurs in speech of New in sentence-initial position.

Seventy percent of the written T-units beginning with New were complex, suggesting that writers were exploiting the possibilities of written syntax. In some cases, the writers were providing a context with peripheral New information with initial time (rarely, all of a sudden) or location (in another room). The initial New written T-units also included the introduction of new physical entities (a robot, a butterfly) and non-physical references (a little human passion, robot-like movements) and references to a context beyond the film (not all people, not only can children). Further study of effective writing patterns is necessary so that the concepts of Functional Sentence Perspective are not oversimplified and misapplied to instruction in composition.

Conclusions

This study asked questions about differences between oral and written presentations in rhetorically comparable situations. Specifically, it asked whether students would include more information, be more concise, and be more explicit in one mode or the other. It also asked whether thematic relations varied by mode and, if so, whether the differences were realized through syntax or diction.

The students conveyed similar amounts of information in each mode, generally telling more in the second presentation whatever the mode. Students who conveyed less information in writing also conveyed less information in speaking than the other students.

Students were more explicit in writing, using more nouns for repeated refererces, while using more pronouns in speaking. They also were more concise, presenting as much narrative and descriptive information in slightly more than half as many written words as spoken (8,733 in writing; 15,565 in speaking).

Thematic relations varied between speaking and writing. Both speaking and writing consisted primarily of T-units with Old--New pattern, but the remainder of the units were distributed differently in the different modes. Speaking, the face-to-face encounter, had more interpersonal references. Writing had more T-units demonstrating planning, or in Chafe's (1982) term, integration. The writing had more compounding and more subordination. It had more repetition of nouns to refer to entities to help readers keep references straight. It had more T-units with complex perspective.

The better writers exploited the possibilities of the writ-

ten mode more than the poorer writers in several ways, but on other measures all writers made adjustments for mode. Better writers had more variety in syntax and diction. All the students had more T-units with complex perspective in writing than speaking. The better writers wrote more T-units about their subjects.

In general, all the writers adjusted their Initial Elements and information structure based on mode. (This analysis only peripherally takes into account the more complex relationships that were possible because of the more complex syntax of the better writers.) Writers used a lower percentage of simple Old--New constructions and a higher percentage of complex ones than speakers. They used fewer Interpersonal, Empty, and Old--Old and more New--New and Inferrable T-units than speakers.

This study has suggested some of the systematic ways writing differs from speaking and some functional linguistic categories teachers may use in analyzing the effectivness of student writing. Recent research by Witte (1983 a and b) demonstrates possible applications of thematic structure to evaluation of writing. Functional Sentence Perspective provides a vehicle for understanding how writers have chosen to present discourse; it is an approach that merits further study and use.

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